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ABSTRACT

A McGill University (Quebec, Canada) continuing education program of French language instruction for specific professions currently under development is described. The program is designed for non-native-speaking Canadians and international students, and emphasizes complete functional control of language skills rather than acquisition of conceptual knowledge and partial functional control of skills. Functions targeted include: initiating, sustaining, and concluding a professional interaction that involves transaction and complications; participating as a full partner in formal, informal, and professional conversations; speaking and writing with appropriate lexicon and sufficient accuracy to sustain communication; and handling effectively a professional negotiation or unfamiliar professional situation. Three general areas of curricular concentration are: linguistic aspects of French; specialized lexical fields; and communication strategies and social/cultural aspects of the language. Program development is based on the expressed needs and content preferences of current French students, measured by survey. Survey results are presented. (MSE)

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BUILDING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY IN FRENCH:

A TAILOR-MADE PROGRAM

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Building Professional Competency in French: A Tailor-made Program

For a number of years now, the Department of Languages and Translation at the Centre for Continuing Education at McGill University has been considering the possibility of creating a French program specially tailored to the needs of the professions. Since the need for such a program became increasingly apparent, we are currently developing a **Certificate of Advanced Professional Proficiency in French**. This program will offer various courses designed to raise the students' speaking, listening, writing and reading competency from an *intermediate level* to an *advanced high level* of proficiency[1], and to allow them to perform effectively in French in their specific professional milieu.

This initiative has been undertaken in response to repeated requests from students enroled in our program. Many of them wanted to go further in their study of French, and they especially wanted their knowledge of the language to become a major asset in their professional careers. What can we offer them once they reach the level of the **Certificate**

of Proficiency in French, the only program of French as a second language presently offered in our department?[2]

Over the years, we have also received frequent requests from the general public for courses adapted to practical needs directly related to specific professions. Lawyers, for example, have in the past contacted us saying they want to develop the vocabulary specific to their profession and to broaden their discursive skills. In response to such requests, over the past few years we have created three courses designed to meet certain specialized needs: **Writing Techniques for Executives; Répétez S.V.P. -- How to Communicate by Telephone in French; How to Express Yourself in Public**. We were aware, however, that these courses do not provide an all-embracing response to the various needs identified.

These repeated requests for specialized courses are no doubt an accurate reflection of the current job market. In fact, many recent studies[3] have shown that the job market is putting increasing pressure on employees and on job hunters. The most sought-after applicants are those with the best communication skills. In Quebec this means having a sound grasp of French in the workplace, because: "Businesses in Quebec expect job applicants to have more than merely 'functional' skills in a second language."[4]

These studies clearly reveal the existence of "serious deficiencies in first- and second-language skills in all categories of the Quebec work force."[3] The Business Language Centre *(Centre linguistique de l'entreprise - CLE)* has done a survey among business leaders that

leaves no doubt about the need to improve the French second-language skills of their employees -- skills that are currently "not up to par." Businesses no longer hesitate to measure their success in the economic sphere against the linguistic performance of their employees. This is why they are now openly expressing their concerns in this area, and applying increasing pressure on job candidates.

The **Certificate of Advanced Professional Proficiency in French** will be designed for non-native speakers of French. The target clientele is the English-speaking community in Montreal, students from other provinces in Canada and, finally, international students, particularly those in business management, communications and the professions.

Upon completion of this program, their skills in French will enable them to:

- act in a professional capacity in French at any required level of proficiency;
- turn their knowledge of French into an important asset in the achievement of their professional goals.

The Certificate curriculum will reflect our belief that a program of this type can only be relevant and effective if it fully takes into account the needs of the professions themselves. This is why we intend to submit our project to the principal professional corporations for their critical appraisal and to consult them as we define the specific objectives of the program and the course content. In Quebec, professional bodies are regulated by the *Office des professions du Québec* and the *Conseil interprofessionnel du Québec*. We intend to invite representatives of the *Office* and the *Conseil*, as well as members of various professional

communities, to sit on the Advisory Committee. Other ways in which we intend to draw upon the resources offered by professional bodies, in both the private and public sector, will be addressed later in this article.

A Functional Approach

The program will stress the development of complete functional control of language skills, rather than the acquisition of a conceptual knowledge and only partial functional control of these skills. Our rationale in choosing this approach was two-fold.

First, it seems that learners have less time to devote to language training, and that they demand, above all, a certain degree of usefulness in what they study. "They are seeking to master (...) skills in segments rather than to acquire broad learning. The logic at work here is that of usefulness. Learning is seen as an activity to give you the precise skill you want, and not another."[5] This trend must be acknowledged. It reflects the desire for a practical skill, a "working language," rather than an intellectual concept, and the desire to test the results acquired in practice, in real situations. Acknowledging this trend does not, however, mean that, merely for the sake of practicality, fragmented or incomplete skills should be taught.

Secondly, this approach will also allow us to focus on the functions that are common to most professions where communication skills are required. These functions include initiating, sustaining and concluding a professional interaction involving a transactional situation with

complications, participating as a full conversational partner in formal, informal and professional conversations, speaking and writing with the appropriate lexicon and with sufficient accuracy so as not to inhibit communication with a native speaker, and handling effectively a professional negotiation or an unfamiliar professional situation[6]. Mastery of these functions will constitute the overall objective of this program.

A recent study by the *Office de la langue française du Québec (Office)* has attempted to identify precisely the linguistic functions that are required in the practice of the major professions[7]. This study will be very useful as we identify the major and secondary functions upon which course content will be based. Since the objective will be the mastery of these functions, they will have to be practiced in as broad a range of professional situations as possible. A functional approach of this type is the only one that can effectively meet the various linguistic needs in a wide range of professional fields.

Areas of Concentration

In building this program, we have identified three general areas of concentration:

1. the study of the linguistic aspects of the language itself;
2. the study of specialized lexical fields;
3. the study of communication strategies and of the social and cultural aspects of the language.

Linguistic Aspects

Since this program will be designed for students who have already reached an intermediate level in French, the global functions which will guide the general objectives for both oral and written proficiency will be of an advanced or superior level. The need to master these functions will determine course content in this area of concentration. Curriculum will include courses in grammar, business discourse and writing techniques and strategies for oral communication. In order to attain advanced communicative proficiency and to master the required linguistic functions, the learners must reach a high level of accuracy in grammar, and possess a thorough understanding of the stylistic rules and the principles underlying the code of discourse[8]. The level of functional ability targeted in each courses will be defined as clearly as possible in order to evaluate the overall language performance of the learner and not solely "discrete aspects of language or knowledge about language."[8] The assessment instruments and criteria used in this program will make it possible to measure the learner's performance and to compare it to the level of ability targeted. The Advisory Committee will have the responsibility of ensuring that the targeted levels of ability, the assessment instruments and criteria are compatible with the program's functional objectives, and that they meet the requirements of the various professions and reflect the evolving needs in the workplace. Representatives from the professions will, therefore, have an essential role to play on the Advisory Committee, and will complement the other types of collaboration and consultation we intend to undertake.

Specialized Lexical Fields

We want to provide students with a more specialized lexicon for specific professions, in addition to helping them acquire a mastery of the standard, frequently used vocabulary of the major professional fields (i.e., the vocabulary commonly used in marketing, banking, etc.). Our approach will be based on independent learning as the means of acquiring this specialized lexicon. Whenever possible, the study of specialized vocabulary will be adapted to individual needs, with emphasis on tutorials and research projects. In undertaking these projects, students will be largely responsible for their own lexical studies. Each student should be able to specialize in his or her lexical field without imposing it on the class as a whole. This option is only possible if the environment offers plentiful resources for specialized individual research. With such resources as the *Office*, numerous professional corporations, francophone universities and a highly diversified business community, Montreal is an ideal place for this type of study. Students will be encouraged to tap these sources directly in the course of their lexical research. Such an approach will have the added advantage of generating interest in our program among professional organizations.

Communication Strategies and Cultural Aspects

The third area of concentration focuses on communication strategies and the sociocultural context and conventions which play a very specific role in this type of language learning. It would be superfluous here to explain how and why the sociocultural aspect now occupies an inescapable place in language programs. Suffice it to say that in order to use French effectively in their respective professional fields, students must know the code governing its

use in professional contexts. Learners want to become users of the language, and to do so they insist that the learning process enable them to "anticipate the usage of the language in social situations..."[9] To be able to do this, they must be familiar with certain cultural codes shared by French-speaking communities, as well as conventions of usage in certain types of discourse specific to professional communications. The protocol of letter-writing is the most well-known example of such conventions. There are, however, many other conventions,[10] such as telephone and teleconference protocol, meeting protocol and the organization of various types of reports and proposals, which are not always addressed in languages courses that are not always discussed in language courses, but nevertheless play an essential role, and knowing them enables students to:

a. develop greater self-confidence in communicating;

b. be more effective in their use of the language;

c. downplay their linguistic difference, since they want, in a sense, to pass "incognito" in a situation of interlinguistic communication.

This third area of concentration will probably take the form of one or two courses based on cases focusing on cultural issues and the study of conventions that are specific to professional communication in French. Needless to say, this does not mean teaching only codes and rules, but rather making learners aware of the context in which French is being used, and teaching them strategies to avoid miscommunication[11]. Once again, students will be encouraged to draw upon the resources immediately available and, whenever possible, to do independent field research.

The Survey

Before embarking on this project, we felt it necessary to verify our initial hypotheses. How great is the demand for such a program and what are the needs of potential students? We decided to undertake a survey to get a more precise idea of the scope of the demand, as well as an idea of the shape such a new program might take. We also thought that with the aid of precise data, we would be better equipped to interest various professional corporations in our project.

The survey instrument, a four-page questionnaire of twenty questions and a cover letter, had several objectives:

a. to measure potential interest in a program oriented to professional competency in French;

b. to gather sufficient data on the potential market;

c. to determine the present level of competency in French among potential students and their linguistic needs;

d. to determine the perceived level of importance of certain language functions;

e. to identify the importance of certain topics in relation to other topics;

f. to verify the relevance of certain orientations and course content choices.

This questionnaire was distributed to students enroled in our French as a second language courses at the intermediate and advanced levels. We collected 271 completed questionnaires from these students. In addition to this, we sent 4000 questionnaires to students enroled in

other programs at the Centre for Continuing Education. The total number of responses that have been compiled for this preliminary study now stands at 930 (271 + 659).

Preliminary Analysis and Interpretation of Some Data

Gender

More than 60% of the respondents were women (Chart 1), a fairly common percentage in a language program, but less common in the accounting, marketing and management programs from which we drew the majority of our sample. We now have to analyze other factors (such as the relationship between gender and profession, position and field of study), in order to determine whether these results will influence program content, and, if so, how.

Mother Tongue

The results show that although English is the principal language spoken (91%), it is the mother tongue of only 60% of the respondents (Chart 1). This finding is clearly significant in measuring the importance of the program's sociolinguistic component (communication strategies, cultural factors and conventions) and suggests another questions which must be addressed. Do anglophones and non-anglophones grant the same importance to cultural considerations? Do both groups identify their language needs in the same manner?

Chart 1

Gender		Mother Tongue	
Female	62.4 %	English	59.0 %
Male	37.6 %	Others	41.0 %

Age

This type of program is especially interesting to the 20 to 29 year-old age group, in other words, individuals who have recently entered the job market. The results show that the vast majority of the people in this age group considers mastering French very important in their current work and/or for their future career(s) in their profession(s) (Chart 2, question 7 and question 8) and are prepared to devote more time and money to this type of training than those in the 30 to 39 age group. However, eventhough the results of the 30-39 age group show a difference of more than 20% with the previous group, the interest of the latter group is still considerable.

Chart 2

Question 7: Would you be interested in a French Program specifically designed to meet the needs of the business community and to enable professionals to achieve an advanced or advanced high level of proficiency in French?

Very interested	42.4 %
Quite interested	34 %
Total	76.4 %

Age	Very interested	Quite interested	Total 1 + 2
20-29	43.99 %	51.82 %	95.81 %
30-39	40.19 %	32.39 %	72.58 %
40-49	12.3 %	12.55 %	24.85 %
50-55	2.22 %	2.02 %	2.24 %
55 +	1.27 %	1.21 %	2.48 %

Question 8: Do you think that a Certificate of Professional Proficiency in French could be an important asset in your career?

Very interested	43.2 %
Quite interested	37.7 %
Total	80.9 %

Age	Very interested	Quite interested	Total 1 + 2
20-29	45.19 %	49.64 %	94.83 %
30-39	38.14 %	35.51 %	73.65 %
40-49	13.14 %	9.78 %	22.92 %
50-54	1.60 %	3.99 %	5.59 %
55 +	1.60 %	1.09 %	2.69 %

Self-evaluation in French

The questionnaire gave a minimal definition of five levels of proficiency:

Novice:	minimal proficiency
Intermediate:	limited proficiency in basic everyday situations
Intermediate high:	limited working proficiency
Advanced:	practical working proficiency
Advanced high:	good professional proficiency.

The results (Chart 3) shows that the majority of the respondents classify themselves as intermediate high (limited working proficiency) or advanced (practical working proficiency for basic tasks). Yet the response to question 13 (the optimal level of proficiency in French needed to be effective in your work) showed that:

a) 60% of the respondents feel they must reach an advanced or advanced high level of oral proficiency;

b) 52.6% feel they must reach an advanced or advanced high of written proficiency.

The difference between the self-evaluation findings and the level considered desirable for work is significant. This confirms the need for such a program and gives us an indication of what the levels should be at entry and upon completion of the program. Essentially, the difference refers to the need to master the new linguistic skills involved in passing a threshold-level -- the intermediate high level on the ACTFL scale.

Chart 3

Self-evaluation in French vs optimal level at work (spoken and written)

Spoken	**Self-evaluation** Question 4	**Level required to be effective at work** Question 13
Novice	5.2 %	
Intermediate	22.4 %	14.7 %
Intermediate high	23.3 %	16.7 %
Advanced	31.4 %	28.6 %
Advanced high	17.7 %	31.3 %
Superior		8.8 %
Written	**Self-evaluation** Question 4	**Level required to be effective at work** Question 13
Novice	13.3 %	
Intermediate	28.0 %	22.1 %
Intermediate high	27.3 %	18.7 %
Advanced	23.9 %	28.6 %
Advanced high	7.6 %	24.0 %
Superior		6.5 %

General tasks

Chart 4 (Question 15) lists several general tasks we consider important in the practice of most professions. It was important to determine whether the results would confirm the importance of these tasks and indicate their relative degree of importance. Chart 5 presents the response to this question. In classifying the tasks by order of importance, we combined answers 1 (very important) and 2 (quite important). The gap between the different tasks is not considerable. They are all considered important (even the ones that obtained ratings of approximately 70%). The task which rated the highest degree of importance was speaking on the phone, a finding which confirms the results of other studies in the field of communications[12]. It's interesting to note that, in terms of communicative proficiency in a second language, the ability to communicate on the phone, does indeed require particularly advanced discourse competence and good strategies.

Chart 4

Degree of importance of different tasks

Importance of the following tasks (Question 15)	**1** **Very Important**	**2** **Quite Important**	**Total** **1 + 2**
Speaking on the phone	55 %	33.6 %	88.6 %
Answering requests for information	50 %	35.1 %	85.1 %
Participating in meeting effectively	50.9 %	28.7 %	79.6 %
Speaking in public	51 %	24.2 %	75.2 %
Negotiating with a client	53.4 %	21.7 %	75.1 %
Dealing with complaints	45.8 %	28.5 %	74.3 %
Writing a letter or memo	39.1 %	33.1 %	72.2 %
Presenting products, services, organizations	46.7 %	23.4 %	70.1 %
Writing a report	41.3 %	26.8 %	68.1 %

Topics

Question 18 lists several course components that we consider important in this type of training. We needed to measure their relative importance. Chart 5 presents the response to this question. Here, the gap between the different components is even less pronounced than for the general tasks, with one exception: only 17.8% of the respondents considered socio-cultural factors "very important", and only 37%, "quite important". These findings suggest that socio-cultural dimension factors in professional communication need not constitute a specific area of teaching, although this does not mean that it is perceived as being of little importance. The findings in Question 18 are, to a certain extent, reinforced by those in Question 17 which show that the teaching of communication strategies and techniques is considered much more important than the teaching of cultural factors or a study of communication using new technologies.

Chart 5

Question 18: What degree of importance do you attribute to each of the following topics?

Courses	Very Important	Quite Important	Rank
1. Grammar	62.4 %	30.8 %	93.2 %
2. Oral specific purposes	60.5 %	31.4 %	92 %
3. Vocabulary	56.4 %	34.6 %	91 %
4. Writing techniques	50.1 %	37.6 %	87.6 %
5. Business writing	50.6 %	36.3 %	86.9 %
6. Principles communic.	45.5 %	37 %	82.6 %
7. Speaking in public	48.1 %	31.9 %	80.1 %
8. Crosscultural	17.8 %	37 %	54.8 %

Question 17: Should a program of this type include in its curriculum:

	Very Important	Quite Important	Total 1 + 2
a. an analysis of the main cultural factors that can play a part in business communication?	19.2 %	37 %	56.2 %
b. a study of different strategies and techniques designed to increase effectiveness in communications?	32.3 %	42.9 %	75.2 %
c. a study of business communication using new technologies?	21.6 %	37.9 %	59.5 %

Conclusion

The preliminary results of our survey confirm the need for language training focused on professional competence. They also demonstrate that, in terms of communicative competence *per se*, the challenge will be to allow learners to progress from the intermediate level to the advanced level. The results also show that the respondents clearly prefer that such training be offered as a accredited certificate program by the university's Centre for Continuing Education, rather than by private schools, professional bodies or employers. To our knowledge, no such program exists elsewhere, at least in Quebec, at this time. Although the respondents consider Continuing Education best-equipped to offer this training, they do endorse the involvement of professional bodies in the definition and evaluation of program objectives.

As for the three areas of concentration we identified for the program, the survey showed that respondents were less interested in the socio-cultural dimension. Interest in studying the use of new technologies in business communication (Question 17) also appeared to be somewhat limited. The real demand is for courses offering basic linguistic training and the acquisition of communicative skills based on specific techniques and strategies. These very encouraging findings will allow us to define the structure of the program, its content and specific objectives.

NOTES

(1) The levels of proficiency to which we refer in this article are the ones on The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign languages (ACTFL) scale.

(2) Students who complete McGill's **Certificate of Proficiency in French** should have attained the equivalent of the Advanced Level on the ACTFL scale.

(3) Centre de linguistique de l'entreprise. "Pour cesser de se plaindre: franciser de l'intérieur." Mémoire soumis à la Commission des affaires sociales sur l'énoncé de politique sur le développement de la main-d'oeuvre. Montréal: 1992

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(5) Porcher, Louis. "Enseigner à apprendre, apprendre à enseigner". AQEFLS - Actes du 11e congrès Montréal 1990 12 (1), Montréal, p. 12.

(6) Adapted from:
The ACTFL OPI Tester Training Manual. Buck, Kathryn et al, eds. Yonkers, NY: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1989.

(7) Larivée, Yves. Portrait linguistique des entreprises de 10 à 49 employés au Québec. Office de la langue française. Montréal (Novembre 1993).

(8) The ACTFL OPI Tester Training Manual. Buck, Kathryn et al, eds. Yonkers, NY: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1989. p. 1-1.

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